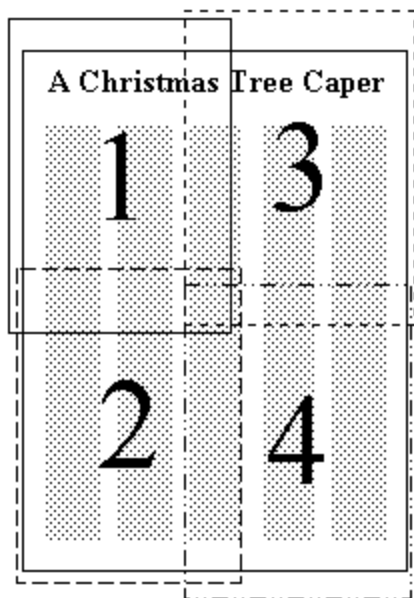


NOTE: This newspaper appearance was divided and enlarged to fill 8 ½" x 11" pages, roughly in the manner shown below.



HONOR AT STEAK

A Short-Short Story

By Jack Ritchie

JENNY MERRILL led the way to a table near the center of the restaurant. She placed a brown paper bag on the table and opened it.

"Ah," she said, her voice pleased. "Bacon, lettuce and tomato."

The waiter standing at my elbow blinked as he watched her unwrap a sandwich. He recovered enough to hand me the menu.

"I'll have sirloin," I said. "Make it rare. French-fried potatoes, peas and coffee."

He wrote that down on his pad and then glanced at Jenny nibbling on her sandwich.

He cleared his throat questioningly.

I met Jenny's eyes. "Ketchup perhaps?"

"No, thank you." She smiled at the waiter. "But another glass of water when I'm through with this one, please."

When he was gone I hummed a tune softly and glanced about the large dining room. The patrons at the other tables were beginning to stare.

A gleam was evident in Jenny's dark-blue eyes. "You



Merrill," I said evenly. "I'm loaded with savoir-faire."

AFTER the last act of the play we walked silently to the bus stop.

When the bus arrived, Jenny got inside and walked down the aisle. I lingered at the entrance to drop some coins into the change box.

The driver looked up at me. "Mister, you put in only one fare."

I smiled patiently. "Of course, I'm only one person."

Jenny's face was crimson as she marched back to the front of the bus. She fumbled in her purse and dropped fare into the box.

long has she been working at the office?"

I gave the question thought. "A little more than a week." I opened a bottle of Coke. "She went unnecessarily far tonight. She also paid for her theater ticket."

Dad blew smoke into the air. "Horrible. If this ever gets out, you'll be the laughing stock of the neighborhood. Children will throw

glanced about the large dining room. The patrons at the other tables were beginning to stare.

A gleam was evident in Jenny's dark-blue eyes. "You didn't think I'd have nerve enough to go through with this, did you, Mr. Malcolm?"

I shrugged my shoulders and said nothing.

THE waiter returned with my meal and hovered about uncertainly. After a while he shook his head and moved on to another table.

"May I use the salt?" Jenny asked. "You won't be charged for that, will you?"

"No," I said. "Try the pepper, too. It's delicious."

When we were finished, I called for the check and left a tip.

"And now the theater?" Jenny asked sweetly.

"Naturally," I said. "I wouldn't think of quitting now."

We walked the two blocks to the Majestic and I stopped at the window to buy two tickets.

Jenny waited at the entrance and handed me money. "My ticket comes to \$3.50, doesn't it?"

I pocketed the bills and change. "Precisely. That's including tax, of course."

We moved down the long lobby and when I glanced back, the ticket-taker still was watching us.

"I trust this doesn't embarrass you," Jenny said, but hope was evident in her eyes.

"Not the least bit, Miss

I smiled patiently. "Of course, I'm only one person."

Jenny's face was crimson as she marched back to the front of the bus. She fumbled in her purse and dropped fare into the box.

"Still cheaper than if I'd used the car," I said. "There'd be gasoline and oil, and we couldn't overlook depreciation."

I left Jenny at the entrance of her apartment house, tipped my hat politely and went home.

MY father and my mother were still up, watching television and having a snack.

My mother's eyes went to the mantle clock. "Must have been a real evening, Ned. You're home early."

I took off my topcoat. "She brought her own dinner," I said gloomily. "And in a brown paper bag, yet."

Dad turned off the television and both of them waited expectantly.

I examined the sandwiches on the tray and found they were bacon, lettuce and tomato, I decided I wasn't hungry.

"Earlier today I made the innocent, harmless, good-natured remark to Fred at the office that the only reason Jenny . . . Miss Merrill had finally decided to go out with me was because she wanted a free meal," I said.

Mother smiled sagely. "Naturally she overheard. Things always work out that way."

I nodded. "Nevertheless, I feel that I wasn't entirely unjustified in saying that. She refused me five times in a row before she accepted."

Dad filled his pipe. "How

tonight. She also paid for her theater ticket."

Dad blew smoke into the air. "Horrible. If this ever gets out, you'll be the laughing stock of the neighborhood. Children will throw stones and dogs will sneer."

"Sounds like a nice girl," mother said. "When are you going to ask her for another date?"

I leaned forward and hissed slightly. "When that fiery place freezes over."

My mother was a bit startled. "Oh," she said. "That's the way the ball bounces?"

"I have my pride," I said. "King size."

FOR the next two weeks, I said little more to Jenny at the office than, "Good morning," and "Good night."

One afternoon when I returned from lunch, I found my mother waiting for me in my office.

"Been tramping all over town doing some shopping," she said. "I thought I might as well stop in here and rest. As long as I was in the neighborhood, that is."

She studied her manicure for a few moments. "There are six girls in the outer office. I'd say that Jenny is the one with the dark hair. Am I right?"

I yawned and said nothing.

"Just as I thought," mother said. "A nice girl."

There was silence as I studied the papers on my desk.

"She looks a bit pale and preoccupied," my mother said. "I don't believe she even noticed me when I came in."

I stifled another yawn.

"You haven't been sleep-

STEAK

By Jack Ritchie



She straightened her shoulders and turned to me. "Mr. Malcom, I have decided to quit," she said.

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ing too well lately, have you, Ned?"

I glanced up. "I sleep like a log."

THERE was a tap on the door and Jenny came in. Her face was definitely pale.

She saw my mother and stopped. "I'm sorry. I'll come back later."

My mother waved a hand. "That's all right, my dear. Do stay. I'm only his mother."

"You're arguing. That's a good sign. It's always healthy to bring things out into the open. And so interesting, too."

I looked at her. "Don't go now and leave us alone," I said. "We'll come to blows for certain."

"But, dear," my mother said, "I wasn't going anywhere. Go on, children. What next?"

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Jenny studied her. "Very well," she said.

She straightened her shoulders and turned to me. "Mr. Malcolm, I have decided to quit."

"Ah, ha," my mother said. "Now you're going to lose her if you don't act immediately."

I raised an eyebrow. "But why, Miss Merrill? Our wages compare favorably with those in similar companies. We have numerous employee benefits. Our cafeteria is one of the finest in the city, and as for our retirement plan —"

"Oh, shut up!" my mother said impatiently. "You can't possibly be that dense." Her eyes went over Jenny. "You haven't been getting much sleep either."

"I sleep like a log," Jenny said firmly. "And furthermore I quit. Q-u-i-t."

"Perhaps if I got you a new typewriter," I said. "I've noticed that your old one—"

"Good heavens, an idiot son," my mother said. "Let's get to the point. You've been ignoring Jenny for the past two weeks. Those are intolerable working conditions."

I GOT to my feet. "Ignoring? When you get turned down five times in a row, you get the general idea that your attentions are not welcome. I'm sensitive and I know."

Jenny's eyes narrowed. "I accepted the sixth time, didn't I?"

My mother smiled happily.

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"But, dear," my mother said, "I wasn't going anywhere. Go on, children. What next?"

"He made me pay my bus fare," Jenny said. "It was perfectly humiliating and it spoiled an otherwise triumphant evening."

I SUPPRESSED a grin. "She had two bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches and she didn't even offer me one. That really hurt."

"What about the tip, Ned?" my mother asked sweetly. "Surely you left a tip for the waiter. Did you collect Jenny's share?"

"Ah," Jenny said with a smile of satisfaction. "Thank you for reminding me, Mrs. Malcolm. And then there was the cover charge, too. I'll get my purse."

"Now hold it, everybody," I said. "Let's not go to extremes."

My mother got to her feet. "How uncannily clever of you to arrive at that point, my dear son." She smiled at us. "I'm a fast restorer. I think I'll be moving along now."

She left before Jenny or I could say anything more.

There was a long silence and then Jenny smiled faintly. "A new typewriter, did you say?"

But she used it less than a year and then she quit again—I insisted.

I was sure that I had enough of an income to support the two of us.

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